



## New York Field Office

# Roseate Tern

Walking along the beach on a beautiful summer day, you notice several silvery white birds with black caps and forked-tails, flying low above the ocean's surface—as if patrolling the beach—and plunging frequently into the surf to catch small fish. They are terns.

Several kinds of terns breed in the northeastern United States along the Atlantic Coast. If you are a careful observer and are in the right location, you may note a few roseate terns (*Sterna dougallii*). They have exceptionally pale plumage, long tail feathers, and bills that are mostly black. The species is so rare it was added in 1987 to the federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife.

### Description

About 15 inches long including their tail, roseate terns are agile, graceful fliers. Roseates usually nest among dense colonies of common terns. Early in the breeding season, the roseate tern's breast feathers have a faint pink tint when seen in bright sunlight, giving the bird its name. Their bills, mostly black in the summer, distinguish them from similar species of terns with red or orange bills. Once breeding at numerous coastal sites from the Maritime Provinces of Canada to North Carolina, roseate terns are now far fewer in number and their breeding range in the United States is only from Maine to Long Island, New York.

### Distribution, Abundance, and Threats

Virtually all of the tern species and most other colonial nesting waterbirds, or birds that nest in groups or colonies, were extremely vulnerable to egg collecting and gunning for the millinery markets that peaked at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Protection afforded by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 enabled the roseate tern and many other waterbird populations to recover by the 1930s. Another decline took place during the 1970s with the loss of nesting colony sites, and by 1978, 90 percent of the entire roseate population occurred in four large colonies: one

in New York, one in Connecticut, and two in Massachusetts.

Herring gulls and great black-backed gulls have become a problem for roseate terns in recent decades. Populations of these large, aggressive birds have increased because of abundant human-generated food in open landfills. Gulls prey on terns by killing chicks and eating eggs. Also, gull pairs displace roseate terns from their traditional, offshore nesting site that are safe from mainland predators. The terns then nest at less-desirable inshore sites that are much more vulnerable to predators.

### Nesting Habits

Adult roseate terns return to the Northeast at the beginning of May after wintering along the northeastern coast of South America. By the end of the month, most birds have paired and selected nesting sites, little more than shallow scrapes on bare ground that are frequently concealed under beach vegetation, rocks, or driftwood.

Roseate parents take turns incubating a clutch of one or two eggs, which hatch in about 23 days. Parents bring small fish to their young chicks. The chicks leave the nest within days of hatching but do not fledge until they are 25 to 29 days old.

Roseate terns leave their nesting islands by early August and forage along barrier beaches in preparation for fall migration. They head out to sea in September, migrating to their wintering grounds. Young birds return to breed when they are between two and five years old.

### Recovery

Since the early 1990s, the roseate tern breeding population has been increasing an average of four percent per year and in 1998 and 1999 it approached 4,000 pairs. Roseate terns on Long Island have shown a gradual increase in numbers since surveys began in 1985. From a low of 873 pairs in 1986, the population has increased to about 1,800 pairs in 1999. The number of active colonies or sites has fluctuated between four and eight during this period, with Great Gull Island in the Town of Southold,

continuing to account for the majority of all roseates nesting in New York since 1995.

Other than Great Gull Island in New York, the next most important roseate tern colonies are located on Bird and Ram Islands in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts, supporting a combined total of about 1,800 pairs. Elsewhere, only Connecticut's Falkner Island and Maine's Easter Egg Rock and Stratton Islands have 100 or more pairs of nesting roseate terns.

## What You Can Do To Help

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists are working to protect roseate terns by helping to ensure remaining tern habitat is protected. You can help protect the roseate tern and other threatened or endangered species by learning as much as you can about them and supporting efforts to protect them and their dwindling habitats. Also, there may be volunteer opportunities or other ways you can support ongoing efforts to help recover this species. Contact one of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offices listed below for more information.

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